

# Matteo Ricci, The Grand Design, And The Disaster Of The ‘Rites Controversy’

by Michael Billington<sup>1</sup>

The apology by Pope John Paul II for the past errors of the Catholic Church in its relations with China, and his appeal to Beijing to renew ties between the Vatican and the People’s Republic of China (reproduced in this issue of *EIR*), come at a time in which the Pope is playing a crucial role in the campaign to build an ecumenical alliance among the nations of Europe and Asia, as the only alternative to the descent into depression and war now threatening mankind. He chose to make this historic call in the name of Father Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit missionary who opened the first sustained Christian mission in China in 1581. The Pope described Father Ricci as “a precious connecting link between West and East, between European Renaissance culture and Chinese culture, and between the ancient and magnificent Chinese civilization and the world of Europe.”

As I shall briefly report here, Ricci’s role was not limited to his own lifetime; rather, his ideas have been at the center of every subsequent effort to build a true alliance between the people of Europe and those of Asia, based on the principle of reason. As U.S. Democratic 2004 Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche said in his address to the Italian Institute for Asia, in Rome, on Oct. 16, an effort to build a world alliance among sovereign nations can never succeed if it is based on the mutual acceptance of each other’s opinions, but only through a dialogue based upon a fundamental agreement on an *idea*—an idea of man distinguished from the beasts through the cognitive power of reason. Ricci lived by this principle, which flourished in China until, a hundred years after Ricci’s death, a Venetian faction in the Church succeeded in turning the Vatican against his ideas. I shall also review this dark page of history, known as the Rites Controversy, to help our readers understand why Pope John Paul II felt it necessary to extend an apology in regard to certain “theological disputes.”

It is most appropriate that this particular Pope, who profoundly understands the importance of his personal mission in the current crisis of civilization, reaches back to Ricci as the universal figure representing the dialogue of cultures so necessary today.

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1. This article expands on earlier work by the author, including, for example, “Toward The Ecumenical Unity Of East And West: The Renaissances Of Confucian China and Christian Europe,” *Fidelio*, Summer 1993.

## Ricci And The Jesuits

The 16th-Century arrival of the Jesuits in China was certainly not the first contact between China and Europe, which goes back thousands of years. In the Middle Ages, Europeans, Persians, and Arabs traversed the famous Silk Road, many taking up permanent residence in China. The Muslims, in particular, contributed their scientific knowledge to the Chinese, becoming the primary astronomers to the court. During the 13th-Century reign of the Kubla Khan over China, Franciscan missionaries from the West had followed the Venetian trader Marco Polo to Cathay, establishing close contacts with the ruling Khan and extensive networks among the Chinese population. But the Franciscans appear to have made little attempt to learn the Chinese Classics—in fact, they appear to have been primarily a “foreign mission,” serving Europeans who came in following the Mongol conquests. With the end of the Mongol reign, the mission collapsed without a trace.

Three hundred years later, St. Francis Xavier, one of the founders of the Society of Jesus, travelled to Asia. After a period in Japan, he determined that the Japanese respect for and deferment to China on philosophical issues necessitated the conversion of China first. He died before reaching the Middle Kingdom, however, and the opening of China fell to another Jesuit, Matteo Ricci.

Ricci arrived in 1581, and developed the policies that guided the mission through the next two centuries. He had received extensive training at the Roman College under the direction of the German Christopher Clavius, who was an associate and friend of the astronomer Johannes Kepler and later of Galileo. Ricci spent four years with Clavius studying geometry, geography, and astronomy, including the construction of astronomical and musical instruments.

What Ricci discovered in China was totally unlike the conditions that prevailed in the Americas, Africa, or India at that time. The Jesuits’ reports to Europe described a country with a civilization which surpassed in many respects that of the West, with a greater knowledge of its own antiquity. A century later, Europe’s greatest philosopher, scientist, and statesman, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, reflecting on the reports from Ricci and those who followed him, reported:

There is in China in certain regards an admirable public morality conjoined to a philosophical doctrine, or rather



Father Matteo Ricci, whom Pope John Paul II described as “a precious connecting link between West and East, between European Renaissance culture and Chinese culture, and between the ancient and magnificent Chinese civilization and the world of Europe.”

a doctrine of natural theology, venerable by its antiquity, established and authorized for about 3,000 years, long before the philosophy of the Greeks.

Recorded Chinese history preceded the generally accepted date for The Flood. The question was posed for Europeans: How could an advanced civilization, outside of the Biblical history of God’s interaction with man, be explained? To Leibniz and to Ricci, China’s history and culture stood as a monument to the truth of One God: that the mind reflects the perfect creation, and thus must lead through reason to the concept of the Creator. Leibniz recognized that China, by far the most populous nation on Earth, and enjoying a highly ordered civil structure, must have achieved that population and that order through some identifiable means. He even suggested that “Chinese missionaries should be sent to teach in the aim and practice of natural theology, as we send missionaries to instruct them in revealed theology.”

### Confucianism Is Consistent With Christianity

Ricci quickly determined that Confucianism was not a religion, but more like an academy which existed for the good of society. Confucius was not worshipped, but the Chinese would “praise him for the good teachings he left in his books . . . without, however, reciting any prayers nor asking for any

favor.” According to Leibniz, the Masters, and one’s own ancestors, were honored in rites whose goal was “to display the gratitude of the living as they cherish the rewards of Heaven, and to excite men to perform actions which render them worthy of the recognition of posterity.”

Ricci was not hesitant to challenge the popular opinion in Chinese society, especially among the literati whom he was trying to convert. After years of studying and translating the Confucian Classics, he recognized that the attempt to syncretize Confucianism with Buddhism and Daoism—a pantheistic conception of “Three Religions” which had been particularly espoused during the Mongol reign across Eurasia in the 13th and 14th Centuries—had greatly compromised the teachings of the Masters of antiquity. The teachings of Confucius and Mencius, he showed, were consistent with the Christian idea of a First Cause, God the Creator, Who created man according to His own nature; but they were totally inconsistent with the “All is One” animism of the Buddhist and Daoist sects.

Ricci wrote: “The commonest opinion held here among those who consider themselves the most wise, is to say that all three sects come together as one, and that you can hold them all at once. In this they deceive themselves and others, and lead to great disorder by its appearing to them that as far as religion is concerned, the more ways of talking about religion there are, all the more benefit will that bring to the kingdom.”

Nonetheless, Ricci befriended and debated a number of Buddhist and Daoist scholars, while consistently arguing against the acceptance of the syncretic “Three Religions” dogma. He concluded that if the Chinese would reject Buddhism and Daoism, and also reject polygamy and a few other relatively minor rites, they “could certainly become Christians, since the essence of their doctrine contains nothing contrary to the essence of the Catholic faith, nor would the Catholic faith hinder them in any way, but would indeed aid in that attainment of the quiet and peace of the republic which their books claim as their goal.”

Ricci translated the primary Chinese Classics into Latin, and wrote several tracts in Chinese that won him great respect and fame among the literati. These included a dialogue between a Western scholar and a Chinese scholar called *The True Idea of the Lord of Heaven*, and several translations, including Euclid’s *Elements* and scientific studies.

Working with Ricci on the Euclid translation was the remarkable Hsü Kuang-ch’i, known as Paul after his conversion to Christianity in Nanjing in 1600, under Father Ricci. Father Hsü was also a leading Confucian scholar and official, and was granted the highest honors as a scholar in 1604 at the famous Hanlin Academy in Beijing. He studied further with Ricci in Beijing from 1604 to 1607. Besides his philosophical and theological writings, he wrote a book on geometry, *Similarity And Difference In Mensuration*, looking at the Pythagorean method as developed in Greece and in China. At his death in 1633 he was considered the leading statesman in



*Emperor Kang Hsi. Leibniz referred to him as a monarch “who almost exceeds human heights of greatness, being a god-like mortal, ruling by a nod of his head, who, however, is educated to virtue and wisdom . . . thereby earning the right to rule.”*

China other than the Emperor himself.

Ricci believed that his knowledge of Renaissance science was inseparable from his knowledge of the Christian faith. He insisted that the leap in scientific progress in Renaissance Europe was not a “secret” of the West, but was the patrimony of all mankind. The same was true of the emerging Classical tradition of music in Europe—Ricci presented the court with a harpsichord, and wrote contrapuntal songs which he taught court officials to play and sing.

Just as Ricci found the Chinese of a moral disposition to embrace Christianity, so were they willing and anxious to enhance their own rich scientific and cultural heritage with the scientific ideas and methods which Ricci and some of the later Jesuits had mastered. Ricci understood that the central issue was the power of cognition as the basis for *knowing* things rather than just *learning* things. He wrote to the Chinese: “Investigation using reason can lead to scientific knowledge, while someone else’s opinions lead only to my own new opinion. Scientific knowledge is absence of doubt; opinion is always accompanied by doubt.”

## Emperor Kang Hsi

Ricci died in 1610 without ever meeting the Emperor. His successors, however, established themselves as the official court astronomers and headed the government engineering bureaus. These positions were generally unaffected by the fall of the Ming Dynasty and the founding of the Qing Dynasty under the Manchu in 1644. The first Manchu emperor, in fact,

placed his son under the tutelage of the Jesuit fathers for training in both the physical and moral sciences.

This son was to become the Emperor Kang Hsi, whom Leibniz referred to as a monarch “who almost exceeds human heights of greatness, being a god-like mortal, ruling by a nod of his head, who, however, is educated to virtue and wisdom . . . thereby earning the right to rule.”

While Kang Hsi was receiving this training in Christian theology and Renaissance science, he also immersed himself in a study of the Confucian Classics, with daily debates over conceptual issues reflected in his diaries. This commitment eventually convinced the Chinese literati that they could support Kang Hsi as Emperor, despite his foreign Manchu heritage. After a series of rebellions in the south were militarily put down, the empire lived in relative peace throughout his long reign (1661-1722), and China’s first international treaty was signed, establishing the borders with Russia, negotiated in Latin, with Jesuits as intermediaries.

In 1692, with Kang Hsi established as a “sage ruler” and the Jesuits holding all leading positions in the astronomy and engineering bureaus, the Emperor issued an edict granting all Christians the right to teach, preach, and convert throughout the empire, subject only to the Ricci policy that scholars—i.e., civil servants—must maintain moral allegiance to the Confucian principles and continue to perform the rites and ceremonies connected to their offices. The eruption of the “Rites Controversy” thus disrupted an extraordinary potential to achieve what Ricci had identified as his greatest goal: the “universal conversion of the whole kingdom.”

## The Rites Controversy

The conflict that led to the complete severing of relations between China and the West was a debate that took place almost entirely in Europe, and played a crucial role in the Reformation/Counter-Reformation conflicts that shook Europe and undermined the ecumenical efforts identified with Leibniz at the beginning of the 18th Century. The public issues arose from accusations that the Jesuits had condoned “pagan” practices and (perhaps intentionally) misinterpreted crucial Chinese terms relative to Confucian views of God. But the actual target of the attack was the Grand Design which Leibniz and his allies were creating to break the power of the Anglo-Venetian oligarchy, which vigorously opposed the dissemination of Renaissance science.

The opposition to Ricci’s policies emerged from a faction among the missionaries composed of Franciscans, Dominicans, and a few Jesuits. The Jesuit João Rodrigues from the Japan mission visited China in 1616 with the intent of imposing a prohibition against missionaries teaching mathematics or science! Rodrigues denounced Ricci’s collaboration with China’s literati, insisting that the method used by missionaries in Japan (insistence on total renunciation of all “pagan beliefs and rituals” for Christian converts) must be applied to China and Confucianism as well. His argument that this “hard line” was not only *necessary* theologically, but also *successful*, was

undermined when the Japanese began severe persecution of the Christians the following year.

Franciscans and Dominicans arrived in China in the 1630s, from Japan, the Philippines, Europe, and the missions in the Americas. The leading opponent of Ricci, and the major target of Leibniz's published defense of Ricci on the issue of the Rites (*Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese*), was the Franciscan Antonio de St. Marie. The Chinese have the "gigantic presumption" to regard their sciences and "their so-absurd philosophy" as the only one in the world, he charged. "So the Fathers of the Society [the Jesuits] have gone to great pains to hide their errors under the cloak and guise of words with a heavenly tinge, whereas in reality beneath is concealed the pallor of hell." On Chinese history, he wrote: "What does it matter to our mission whether the ancient Chinese knew God, or didn't know Him, whether they named Him in one way or another? The question is completely indifferent. We have come here to announce the Holy Gospel, and not to be apostles of Confucius."

St. Marie had arrived in China in 1633 from the Philippines, spending only three years in China before returning to Rome to argue against the Jesuits. It should be noted that the Franciscans and Dominicans pointed to their success in the Americas in the conversion of whole cultures as proof of their method, demanding total renunciation of native pagan beliefs by all converts. That this could be true precisely because the native beliefs were pagan, but that Confucianism was not, was dismissed as heresy. One exception among the Dominicans, perhaps the only one, was the Dominican Bishop Gregory Lopez (Lo Wen-tsao), the only native Chinese Christian prelate of the 17th and 18th Centuries. He agreed totally with Ricci.

## Venetian Efforts Go Into High Gear

The controversy remained largely a matter of theological debate throughout the 17th Century. Efforts of several opponents to draw the Pope into the controversy were side-stepped by the Pontiff. But soon after Kang Hsi issued the edict in 1692 granting full rights to Christian proselytizing, Venetian efforts to crush the mission went into high gear. In France, the great statesman and nation-builder Jean-Baptiste Colbert had initiated policies that resulted in a group of French Jesuits joining the China mission in the 1680s. But by the end of the century, an inquisitional investigation of a book published by one of the returning missionaries, Father Louis Le Comte, was launched at the Sorbonne.

The inquest was run by members of the Jansenist sect, followers of Cornelius Otto Jansen, a nominal Catholic whose "predestination" dogma echoed that of Calvin. They preached that all men were evil, with redemption only available through the grace of Christ, and only to a small number, "chosen in advance and destined to enter the Kingdom of Heaven." The Renaissance was their primary target, because, they claimed, it had alienated Christians from Jesus.

The Jansenists had become extremely powerful at the Sor-

bonne, and to a lesser extent in Rome. They led a general assault against the Jesuits, with the China issue playing a central role. The inquest of the book about the China mission resulted in the condemnation of several central aspects of Ricci's view on the Chinese conception of God and morality. The Jesuit author, Father Le Comte, in response to the charge that the Chinese were pagans who had no knowledge of the true God, asked how it could be that "in an empire so vast, so enlightened, established so solidly, and so flourishing . . . in number of inhabitants and in invention of almost all the arts, the Divinity has never been acknowledged? What of the reasoning of the Fathers of the Church, who, to prove the existence of God, have drawn on the agreement of all peoples, arguing that Nature has impressed the idea on them so deeply that nothing can efface it?"

As the fight in Europe intensified, the mission in China recognized that serious countermeasures were necessary. They decided to propose to Emperor Kang Hsi that he issue an edict in his own name clarifying the meaning of the terms in question and the meaning of the rites honoring ancestors. His response was unambiguous, especially on the two crucial issues: There was, in Chinese philosophy, an omnipotent deity who created and rules over the universe; and the rites of ancestor worship were signs of respect, without any superstitious beliefs in spirits existing in the stone tablets. As we shall see, even the authority of the sage Emperor did not deter the opponents of ecumenical peace and development.

The agitation in Europe finally succeeded in persuading Pope Clement XI, in 1704, to issue a Bull against Christian adherence to Confucian beliefs and rites, and a papal legate was sent to China to further investigate. The legate was at first somewhat reasonable, and in a meeting with Kang Hsi was nearly convinced of the Emperor's position. However, in a second meeting, he was joined by Msgr. Charles Maigrot, the Vicar Apostolic in Fukien, of the French Foreign Missions, who fanatically despised China's culture, its literati, and the Jesuits. Maigrot had learned little about the Chinese or their language, yet, in his meeting with Emperor Kang Hsi, he challenged the Emperor's knowledge of the meaning of Chinese terms. Kang Hsi was disgusted, and made clear that "the Doctrine of Confucius was the teaching of the empire, and it could not be touched if one wished that the missionaries remain in China." Maigrot was banished for his insolence.

When Kang Hsi later read the Papal Bull, he wrote: "On reading this proclamation, I can only conclude that Westerners are small-minded. . . . Now I have seen the Legate's proclamation, and it is just the same as Buddhist and Daoist heresies and superstitions. I have never seen such nonsense as this."

The demand that the Chinese denounce Confucianism in order to become Christian meant that no scholar in any official position—including teachers—could become a Christian without renouncing his position, and no Christian could become an official of any sort. To the Emperor, such a demand

was tantamount to insisting that his officials no longer be accountable to the moral code that had guided the nation for thousands of years—the “constitutional” foundation of society. Adopting the new, higher moral standards of Christianity posed no difficulty—in fact, it was encouraged—but that could in no way be interpreted as being a rejection of the natural law precepts of the Masters.

### ‘The Devil Leads Men Astray’

Kang Hsi banned Christianity after his meeting with Maigrot, but softened his position and tried for years to negotiate a solution. However, reaction had seized control of the process. A year after Leibniz’s death in 1714, a new Papal Bull reiterated the ban. Kang Hsi, dumbfounded, asked the missionaries if they had failed to convey his views to the Pope: “You have corrupted your teachings and disrupted the efforts of the former Westerners. This is definitely not the will of your God, for He leads men to good deeds. I have often heard from you Westerners that the devil leads men astray—this must be it.”

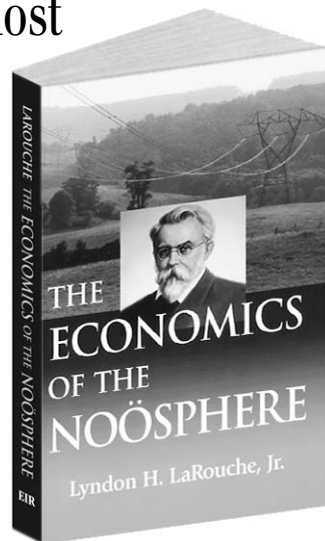
As late as 1720, the Emperor called a conference of all the missionaries and reiterated that for nearly 200 years the Christians had preached “without violating any laws of China.” He asked, how could Maigrot, “who did not even recognize the characters, presume to discuss the truth or falsehood of Chinese laws and principles?” But in 1721, after a

second papal legation made no concessions, Kang Hsi changed his perspective. His writings began to identify irreconcilable distinctions between East and West. By 1742, with yet another Papal Bull, any hope for saving the alliance was finished. Christianity was banned, Westerners expelled, and China was cut off from Western science and technology. The Papal Bull was not to be lifted until the 1940s.

The emperors who followed, after Kang Hsi’s death in 1722, maintained a few Jesuits in the court, but they were reduced to the status of advisers, with little hope of reopening the teaching and conversion process of either the literati or the masses. Both China and Europe were significantly set back. One hundred years later, a weakened China was prey to an evil, drug-running British Empire, which had emerged from the defeat of the republican forces in Europe. The infamous Opium Wars unleashed a century of wars and foreign colonial conquest. The Church, while renewing in some respects the effort to forge ecumenical peace in the search for truth among cultures, often played a role in facilitating the colonial policies which devastated China for more than 100 years, for which the current apology of Pope John Paul II is most appropriate.

Today, if the kind of Grand Design envisioned by Leibniz and Ricci is to succeed, the model of the ecumenical dialogue of cultures between East and West must be reborn, in the spirit of Christian *agapē* and Confucian *ren*.

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